Crisis in tea gardens

612. SHRI TARINI KANTA ROY: Will the Minister of COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government are aware of the crisis faced by the plantation workers;

(b) whether Government are also aware of the problems faced by the tea gardens in the Northern part of West Bengal; and

(c) if so, the steps Government are contemplating to tackle the problem?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY (SHRI E.V.K.S. ELANGOVAN): (a) and (b) The plantation crops, mainly tea and coffee, have been affected due to the fall in prices during the last few years. Owing to the lower price realisation, which has adversely affected the viability of the tea gardens, some tea gardens in the country, including those in West Bengal, have been closed/abandoned during the last few years. This has caused unemployment among the tea garden workers.

(c) The Plantations Labour Act, 1951 provides for the welfare of plantation labour and regulates the conditions of work in plantations, including tea. This Act is administered by the State Governments and it specifies the various facilities to be provided to the workers. Government of India had taken up the matter regarding the problems being faced by the workers of the tea gardens with the State Government of West Bengal for intervention and providing necessary relief. The State Government of West Bengal has taken certain steps to provide relief to the affected plantation workers and their families. This include creation of employment opportunities through various schemes, extending health care, implementing nutrition programmes for children, augmenting drinking water facilities and distribution of cash to the most needy.

Government of India had appointed an Expert Committee to make an in-depth study of 19 tea gardens in the State of West Bengal, which were lying closed in 2002. Based on their recommendations, Central Government and Tea Board have facilitated discussions between the managements of the tea gardens, which have been identified as potentially viable, and their bankers to work out revival packages.

Government of India has also taken a number of steps to help the Indian tea industry, including those in Northern part of West Bengal. These

include setting up of a special fund out of collections by way of additional duty of excise of Re. 1 per kg on tea for the development, modernisation and rehabilitation of tea plantation sector, implementation of—(i) an IT based Information Dissemination Plan for the tea industry including conversion of manual auctions into electronic auctions so as to improve the efficiency of the tea purchase systems, (ii) Special Tea Term Loan (STTL) which envisages restructuring/rephasing of outstanding term/working capital loans in the tea sector with working capital upto Rs. 2 lakhs at a rate not exceeding 9% to small growers, (iii) Price Subsidy Scheme for small tea growers for a period of four months from February to May 2004, (iv) a price sharing formula between small tea growers and manufacturers of made tea w.e.f. 1.4.2004 etc.

Strategy at WTO

613. SHRI S.M. LALJAN BASHA: Will the Minister of COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have held discussions recently with the stake holders and others to present its negotiating strategy at WTO;

(b) if so, whether Government will call more frequent meetings with the stake holders to apprise them of the development at WTO;

(c) how Government propose to strengthen the negotiating team at WTO to represent the farmers' interests; and

(d) the details of the strategy arrived at in this regard?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY (SHRI E.V.K.S. ELANGOVAN): (a) to (d) Consultations on various areas under discussion and negotiation in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) are held from time to time by Government with stakeholders, including farmers' associations, industry associations and representatives and other non-governmental bodies, concerned Ministries/ Departments and State/Union Territory Governments. To provide guidance to the Government, issue-specific studies have also been assigned to research bodies and Expert Groups, consisting of eminent persons, researchers and other stakeholders in various areas, have been constituted which meet from time to time depending on the exigencies of the